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SUBJECT: ALBANIA: First Deaths Due to H1N1

¶1. (SBU) Summary : Albania announced its first H1N1 death of an otherwise "healthy" patient on December 13, bringing the total to four deaths in the past three weeks. Incidence rates for respiratory illness overall have hit ten year highs but have fallen short of epidemic status and have stabilized recently. The incidence rate of H1N1 in statistical samples of those exhibiting flu-like symptoms has grown from ten to fourteen percent. The GOA has maintained an active surveillance and public information program and the first shipment of the H1N1 vaccines is expected to arrive December 18th. End Summary.

Fourth H1N1 Deaths in Three Weeks

¶2. (U) Media reports that December 13th the first victim who did not have pre-existing serious health conditions died from complications from H1N1. The day before, Ministry of Health officials confirmed two additional deaths attributable to H1N1, a 47 year old woman and a 53 year old man. Both patients had extensive pre-existing health problems and were receiving specialized care for H1N1 prior to their death. Several other patients are said to be in critical care who are positive for H1N1. Two weeks prior, Albania registered its first death attributable to H1N1, a 57 year old male patient who was suffering from prostate cancer and heart disease. While the majority of overall H1N1 cases have been in the Tirana area, the newest fatalities are from Vlora (southern Albania) and Shokdra (northern Albania). Statistical sampling efforts to date have focused mainly on Tirana but the Ministry of Health is considering taking more samples from those experiencing flu-like symptoms outside of Tirana.

Number of H1N1 Cases Growing Daily

¶3. (U) Since July 2009 there have been 310 confirmed cases of H1N1 in Albania with the average age of infection being 23 years. Almost all have exhibited only mild to moderate clinical symptoms. Patients are regularly being treated with Tamiflu and the majority of cases continue to be centered around Tirana. While previous sampling of those admitted with flu-like symptoms showed an H1N1 incidence rate of 10 percent, the most recent statistics show that the H1N1 incidence rate has jumped to 14 percent.

Already a Record Flu Season but No Epidemic

¶4. (U) Before November the incidence rate for all respiratory infections was similar to seasonal patterns, but during November there was a large upswing, just falling short of epidemic status. December has shown that trend stabilizing and decreasing. Infection rates (detected) continue to be the highest of the past ten years. While a peak in respiratory infections is expected in winter the peak historically has come January or later. Ministry of Health officials still expect another upswing after January.

Emptying Schools and Filling Waiting Rooms

¶5. (U) Local hospitals have been feeling the burden of the spike in flu cases with over 60 people being seen daily at Mother Teresa Hospital, the local hospital for pediatrics and internal medicine. Documented H1N1 cases are being transferred to Tirana for specialized care. In schools, local media is reporting an

absenteeism rate of 10-15 percent of children due to flu like symptoms and the government has issued guidance consistent with international guidelines about how to prevent the seasonal flu as well as H1N1. Also, recently hung signage at the airport warns travelers of the symptoms of the flu. The H1N1 vaccine is expected to arrive December 18th and while the GOA will focus on at-risk groups it will also reportedly be available for all that wish to pay to be vaccinated.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: While the rising level of fatalities is disturbing and makes headlines, the overall trend for respiratory illness appears to be stabilizing. However, it will take a much larger decrease to return to seasonal norms. More troubling is the increase in the H1N1 incidence rate, which appears to be becoming more prevalent among flu patients according to Ministry of Health sampling. The GOA has been supplying information for several months on how to avoid all forms of flu, has an active taskforce, and has been issuing frequent updates on H1N1. However, public health resources are strained normally and a further spike, which often occurs in January, will certainly overtax hospital resources. End Comment